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John Kerr: A Scholar Who Also Acts

Young Star Pursues High Degrees

By DON ROSS

John Kerr, the tortured prep schoolboy in "Tea and Sympathy," met the girl he later married in a Serbo-Croatian class at Harvard. She was a Radcliffe undergraduate.

The meeting place is characteristic of Mr. Kerr, who was voted last year in the annual "Variety" poll the most promising new young actor on Broadway. Other men have met their future wives at cocktail parties, picnics or movies. But Mr. Kerr, who is twenty-two, is an intensely serious man. It is doubtful that he goes to cocktail parties, picnics or movies.

He no longer goes to Serbo-Croatian classes. Instead he goes to classes in Old Russian literature, nineteenth-century Russian literature, political institutions of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union in international affairs and Soviet history. In addition to his work in "Tea and Sympathy", in which he plays opposite Deborah Kerr (no relation), Mr. Kerr is a full-time student in the Russian Institute at Columbia University. Having acquired a Harvard A. B., he is now working for an M. A. in Slavic language and literature.

Mrs. Kerr, an attractive young woman whose name was Priscilla Smith when John met her at Harvard, is now a Russian-English translator for "The Current Digest of the Soviet Press," a private publication circulating among American government officials, editors, educators, and others interested in keeping informed about Russia.

For four months in the fall of 1952, Mrs. Kerr worked in Central Intelligence Agency in Washington. In December of that year she and John were married and she quit her job. What she did for C. I. A. is a secret shared only by Mrs. Kerr and the C. I. A. She won't even tell John.

No Radical

"I don't want people to get the impression from this interest in Russia that I'm a radical," Mr. Kerr said in an interview the other night. "I started studying about Russia at Harvard right after the Korean War began in 1950. I had the idea that you should know your enemy. A lot of misunderstanding arises because some people



John Kerr and Dick York, who plays his roommate, in "Tea and Sympathy," the hit play at the Ethel Barrymore Theater.

who don't know enough get up and yell. Well, if I'm going to do any yelling I'd rather know what I'm yelling about."

At Harvard, from which he was graduated in 1952, Mr. Kerr did work at the Russian Research Center. One of his jobs was to do some coding on questionnaires for Russian-speaking displaced persons in Europe.

Mr. Kerr, who comes from a theatrical family, made a hit last season in "Bernardine," the only other Broadway show he has appeared in. That success and his present one have made it pretty obvious that he is headed for a distinguished acting career. His mother is June Walker, who recently appeared here in "Ladies of the Corridor," and his father Geoffrey Kerr, the English actor and writer.

Wants To Be a Writer

"Acting doesn't fill any particular need of mine," said Mr. Kerr. His love is writing and he made it clear he will stop being an actor as soon as he can make a living as a writer.

Mr. Kerr keeps plugging away at his writing in his Greenwich Village apartment. It's fiction and, Mr. Kerr said "not particularly commercial."

In one of his short stories a prizefighter in his middle twenties has a psychological problem. He's insecure but because he wins his fights, this doesn't bother him too much. He loses a fight, however, and this is a shattering experience. The story, Mr. Kerr said, has a pathetic ending.

"What does the fighter do?" Mr. Kerr was asked.

"Nothing," he said.

Another story is about a four-year-old boy who lives with his domineering, chauvinistic grandmother. He has a recurrent dream in which he imagines that his father is alive and everything is pleasant. The little boy goes out to play one day with some older children. They are playing war and he is chosen as the enemy. He gets into a hole while they throw rocks and tin cans at

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him. The little boy raises his head. A rock hits him, but doesn't hurt him seriously. The little boy lies down and the recurrent dream comes over him.

When he attended Exeter Mr. Kerr felt that acting was to be his career. Summers, he was an apprentice at the Cape Playhouse at Dennis, Mass., and appeared there with the late Gertrude Lawrence in "O Mistress Mine" and "September Tide." At Harvard he played in the Brattle Theater productions of Melville's "Billy Budd" and Christopher Fry's "A Sleep of Prisoners." It was the latter play that brought him to the attention of Guthrie McClintic, the producer, then looking for some one to play the role of Air Force Cadet Arthur Beaumont in "Bernardine."

Acted for Money

"When did it occur to you that you no longer wanted to be an actor?" Mr. Kerr was asked.

"At Harvard in my freshman year," he said. "Harvard opened up a whole new world to me of books and culture. I appeared in plays at Harvard simply because there was money in it."

Mr. Kerr is a fairly familiar face on television, having acted in such shows as "You Are There," "Suspense," "The Web" and "Danger." But he doesn't accept all the television engagements offered to him.

The other day he was invited to play the part of a Mexican Indian bullfighter in a playlet by Budd Schulberg on "Omni-bus." Mr. Kerr turned it down.

"Do I look like a Mexican Indian?" Mr. Kerr asked, rather unnecessarily.